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## **Responsible Leadership: Interweaving Personal and Public in Pluralistic, Contested Space**

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**ABSTRACT.** We examine the notion of responsible leadership. Consistent with the contextual 'turn' in mainstream leadership literature, we argue that theorising about responsible leadership needs to consider responsible business practices as socially constructed and interpreted differently across individuals, organizations, institutional fields and the wider political, economic and socio-cultural context. We position responsible leadership with regards to discourses about ethical conduct, corporate responsibility (CSR), shared governance, the institutionalization of responsible business, and public debates about wider societal challenges – debates that are still emerging, inherently pluralistic and contested. Based on a study of 34 individuals, we identify three responsible leadership practices: institutionalising, field shaping and engaging systemically. We discuss four case studies to show that these practices reflect individuals' construction of self-in-the-world and their evolving understanding of how to influence social systems. Findings show that individuals' construction and enactment of responsible leadership interweaves personal, relational and wider systemic considerations.

**KEY WORDS:** Responsibility, leadership, ethics, corporate social responsibility, collaborative governance, institutional fields, social construction, discourse, systemic thinking

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## Introduction

Reflecting wider public debates about the responsibility of organizations, there has been growing interest among management scholars in conceptualising and studying responsible leadership (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Boiral et al., 2008; Maak and Pless, 2006a; Marshall, 2007; Waddock, 2007; Waldman and Siegel, 2008). The aim of this article is to problematise the potential portrayal of 'responsible leadership' as a coherent notion. To do so, we take responsible leadership beyond a positioning within the discourses of ethics, corporate responsibility (CSR), and shared governance. We also consider the relevance of institutional fields shaping responsible business (Waddock, 2008) and of public debates about the need for organizations to respond to societal challenges, such as social justice, poverty and sustainability – debates that are still emerging, inherently pluralistic and contested (Maguire and Hardy, 2006; Waddock, 2007; Tams and Marshall, 2010).

Our approach connects to the contextual 'turn' in leadership literature. This new direction challenges the focus on the discrete actors of leadership, their characteristics and capabilities. Instead, it situates leadership in webs of relational influence (adopting a 'relational ontology', Uhl-Bien, 2006) and examines the practices by which leadership is constructed and enacted (Foldy and Ospina, 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wood, 2005). The contextual 'turn' has grown out of the recognition that attributing leadership primarily to those who are in positions of formal authority is inadequate to account for the wider range of possibilities by which leadership is enacted across different situations. Taking leadership beyond the context of hierarchically defined leader-follower relationships appears particularly relevant to our interest in responsible leadership as it involves diverse participants from different organizations (Maak and Pless, 2006b; Ospina and Foldy, 2010).

Notwithstanding, context presents a paradox for leadership theory. On the one hand, an appreciation of the structures, cultures, and processes through which leadership is enacted can instil a scepticism about leaders' influence (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Wood, 2005). On the other hand, characterizations of the context of responsible leadership as highly entrepreneurial and boundary-spanning suggest that charismatic individuals play a central role in shaping new cognitive understandings and innovative initiatives (Elkington and Hartigan, 2008; Pless, 2007; Shamir, 1999; Waddock, 2008).

One way of addressing this seeming paradox is to consider how individuals construct themselves in relation to their given situations (Boiral et al., 2008; McCauley et al., 2006) and the practices by which they enact leadership within these situations (Foldy et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Conceptualising responsible leadership as a situated practice challenges a view of context as an objective reality that is external to leaders and leadership. Instead, it conceives context as a social reality that is constructed in the framing and legitimization of responsible leadership (Basu and Pallazo, 2008; Foldy et al., 2008; Grint, 2005). Furthermore, positioning responsible leadership at the business-society interface draws attention to the multilayered character of the social 'reality' that individuals draw upon when constructing and enacting responsible leadership. This includes shared understandings constructed in interactions with other participants of responsible initiatives (e.g., Maak and Pless, 2006b; Ospina and Foldy, 2010), institutional infrastructures of responsible business (Waddock, 2008), discourses about leadership (Fairhurst, 2009; Marshall, 2007), and popular culture (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2004).

The observations about responsible leadership developed in this article resulted from a study of 34 individuals who are seeking to have an impact on societal challenges through careers in the fields of corporate responsibility, sustainability, social entrepreneurship, and social investing. Although many of them do not hold formal positions of authority, their accounts illustrated how they sought to influence organizations and wider organizational fields. Specifically, their stories revealed how their leadership practices interwove both

personal aspirations and situational considerations. We also noticed how individuals were learning and adapting in response to the external environment. Building on the larger sample, the present article focuses on four individuals who held formal positions of influence. They were respectively: setting-up a business unit that provides high end management consulting to international development organizations, promoting a global reporting system for ethical supply chain data, embedding sustainability within corporate business, and linking funders to social businesses in developing countries. This case study approach sheds light on the complex interdependencies between individual and contextual aspects that are less evident when qualitative data is presented as codes.

Based on this research, we develop three arguments. First, we describe responsible leadership as a collection of situated practices and identify institutionalising, field shaping and engaging systemically. Second, we argue that the enactment of responsible leadership practices interweaves both individuals' commitments to having an impact on societal issues and their experiential learning within their given institutional situations. Third, we suggest that responsible leadership practices are adapted in response to shifting landscapes that emerge both from changes in the external environment and individuals' evolving appreciations of how to position themselves within institutional contexts.

Before presenting our findings, we propose that understandings of responsible leadership need to extend beyond the actors of particular initiatives to also include the wider institutional and public realms in which such leadership is situated, recognising their ambiguous and dynamic nature. We develop this idea with reference to five discourses about responsible leadership.

### **Discourses about responsible leadership**

Since 'responsible leadership' represents a relatively new notion, we believe that it is important to reflect critically about its scholarly framing (Alvesson, 1996). We became interested in responsible leadership in order to 'name' and theorise empirical observations which we had generated in our interactions with practitioners. We noticed that the traditional language of leadership was insufficient to fully account for our observations. Moreover, emerging models of responsible leadership did not acknowledge the ontological debates within 'mainstream' leadership literature. We also found associating responsible leadership with morality or 'the common good' problematic, because it can appear normative or idealistic (Dentchev, 2009), ignores the socially constructed nature of responsible business logics (Berger and Luckman, 1966), and fails to recognise its inherently pluralistic and contentious character (e.g., Boiral et al., 2009; Gladwin et al., 1995). Therefore, a reflective appreciation of responsible leadership can be informed by the discourses that have been used in its framing.

Discourses are invoked *both* by practitioners *and* scholars. Consistent with Fairhurst (2009: 1616-1617), we understand discourses as "interpretive repertoires" or "tool bags of terminology, tropes, themes, habitual forms of argument" that supply leadership actors and scholars with the linguistic resources for framing responsible leadership. In so far as discourses evolve from 'talk-in-interaction' to more robust 'systems-of-thought', Fairhurst further proposes that leadership actors (and scholars) can use multiple discourses to create a "space of action" (Daudi, 1986) in which to exert agency,

Table 1 synthesises arguments about responsible leadership made by the five discourses we will discuss.

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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*Ethical conduct.* A frequently cited *raison d'être* for responsible leadership relates to ethical scandals which implicate large corporations and financial institutions (e.g. Enron and the subprime mortgage crisis). These events have raised concerns about the ethical conduct of leaders and their ability to consider the wider consequences of their actions. In response to

these challenges, research suggests that perceptions of responsible or ethical conduct within leader-follower relationships are influenced by leader characteristics, such as their integrity, values and leadership styles (Brown et al., 2005; Brown and Trevino, 2006; De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008; Gardner et al., 2005; Schminke et al., 2005; Trevino et al., 2003). Additionally, people's ethical conduct is also socially embedded and influenced by organizational cultures (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Hamilton and Berken, 2005; Maak and Pless, 2006b) and the behavioural assumptions conveyed through the education and professionalization of managers (Ghoshal, 2005; Khurana and Nohria, 2008).

*Corporate responsibility.* A second way of framing responsible leadership has been to position it with regards to corporate responsibility (or CSR) debates. The central concern here is with explaining organizations' approaches to corporate responsibility. Literature in this area resembles ethical leadership debates in several respects. For example, it identifies leaders' values (Hemingway and MacLagan, 2004; Waldman et al., 2006a) and leadership styles (Maak and Pless, 2006a; Waldman et al., 2006b) as critical antecedents. It draws attention to the alignment between leader characteristics and their organizations' approach to corporate responsibility (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Hemingway, 2005; Waldman and Siegel, 2008) and the learning processes by which managers and organizations adapt to each other (Branzai et al., 2004) and to the external environment (Basu and Pallazo, 2008). However, organizations' corporate responsibility strategies are also the subject of controversy (Matten et al., 2003). Responsible leadership needs to situate itself within this contested space.

*Collaborative governance.* Responsible leadership can also be understood from discourses of collaborative governance. Collaborative initiatives, including inter-organizational networks and multi-stakeholder collaborations, have been developed in public and civil society sectors, recognising that solutions to complex social or environmental problems can not be achieved by any single organization or sector alone (Crosby and Bryson, 2010; Selsky and Parker, 2005). Collaborative forms of governance have also been considered as models for business organizations to involve employees, clients, customers, business partners, advocacy groups, non-profit organizations, communities, and shareholders in responsible leadership issues (Maak, 2007; Pless and Maak, 2009). Far from presenting a coherent voice, this literature reflects different ontological positions (Uhl-Bien, 2006). One views the actors of responsible leadership as discrete entities and identifies what contributes to their integration (Crosby and Bryson, 2010; Maak and Pless, 2006b). Another emphasises the relational enactment of collaborative governance (Huxham and Vangen, 2000), and the socially constructed and contested character of accomplishing responsible leadership (e.g., Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

This literature investigates what shapes collaborative governance. At the individual level, it identifies the leader competences required to build legitimacy among the multitude of participants (Maak and Pless, 2006b). At the collaborative level, it describes the integrative structures, processes and practices that facilitate boundary-work and collaboration (Crosby and Bryson, 2010) and suggests responsible leadership as the task of bringing about a cognitive shift among participants of social change initiatives (Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Poncelet 2001a). However, collaborative governance is also inherently problematic. It can replicate traditional power constellations where large global companies, financial institutions and management consultancies dominate and civil society remains under-represented (Brown et al., 2009). Its non-confrontational stance can undermine radical challenge and innovation (Poncelet, 2001b). It is also subject to changes in its wider discursive space, such as shifting public policy agendas (Huxham and Vangen, 2000), tensions between ideology and

pragmatism (Vangen and Huxham, 2003), and the favouring of scientific and economic discourses at the neglect of other concerns (Everett and Jamal, 2004).

*Institutionalising responsible business.* A fourth discourse builds on 'new institutionalism', defining institutional fields as sets of organizations and networks that together constitute a recognised area of institutional life (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 148). It characterises corporate responsibility, social entrepreneurship, social investing, and sustainability as 'emerging' institutional fields because they are sector-crossing and socially innovative. An institutional perspective attends to the processes by which these fields produce and change participants' common understandings, practices and ongoing relationships with each other (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Maguire et al., 2004). In responsible business fields, corporate organizations are only one among many participants. Also involved are specialist consulting firms, powerful foundations, social enterprises, charities, think tanks, government agencies, event-organizations, initiatives directed at developing management and reporting standards, educational programmes, and professional networks (Waddock, 2008).

The institutional discourse identifies several aspects not considered previously. On the one hand, it suggests that emerging fields present unique opportunities and demands for leadership because coordination of action among participants is still limited and practices are only narrowly diffused and weakly entrenched (Maguire et al., 2004: 659), whilst describing leadership as social or institutional entrepreneurship. Given their underspecified character, it is not surprising that the evolution of responsible business fields has been associated with leadership by inspirational individuals (Elkington and Hartigan, 2008; Waddock, 2008). On the other hand, the newness of these fields also creates pressures for building cognitive and socio-political legitimacy (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Schepers, 2010). Leadership here involves framing, diffusing and legitimising professional knowledge, shared codes of practices, and common standards (Maguire et al., 2004; Marshall, 2007; Waddock, 2008). For example, the field of corporate responsibility has been significantly influenced by the institutionalization of a triple bottom line accounting framework (Elkington, 1997) through the Global Reporting Initiative (Brown et al., 2009; McIntosh et al., 2003). An institutional perspective suggests that access to inter-organizational consortia and professional associations can provide individuals with resources and legitimacy to advance responsible change initiatives (Maguire et al., 2004; Lounsbury, 2001).

An institutional discourse also suggests that leadership entails struggle. This struggle arises from threats to the legitimacy of emerging institutional practices (Schepers, 2010), the pluralistic and contested positions of diverse participants (Glynn et al., 2000; Maguire and Hardy, 2006) and their competing institutional logics (Lounsbury, 2007; Lounsbury and Pollack, 2001). This is evident in language that fuses contradictory logics such as 'development' and 'business', 'social' and 'enterprise', or 'strategy' and 'philanthropy' (Battilana and Dorado, forthcoming; Roper and Cheney, 2005). Struggle also arises from participants' different sources of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Everett and Jamal, 2004). In the case of the Global Reporting Initiative, this struggle is illustrated by the limited involvement of civil society organizations and NGOs (Brown et al., 2009), and activists' criticisms of its misuse by some corporations (Christian Aid, 2004).

*Public discourse.* Finally, responsible leadership can be framed in response to wider public discourses about social and environmental issues, such as the depletion of the earth's natural resources, loss of biodiversity, social and economic injustice, threats to food security, systemic risks of financial markets, corruption, and climate change. Acknowledging the sphere of 'public discourse' addresses a limitation of models that anchor wider public concerns with particular actors, such as advocacy groups, non-profit organizations and communities. These actors can influence public discourse, but public discourse reflects wider

socio-cultural sentiments. It is expressed in popular culture (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2004), such as Al Gore's (2006) *An Inconvenient Truth*, Margaret Atwood's (2009) apocalyptic *The Year of the Flood*, Cormac McCarthy's (2006) *The Road* and the activism of music and film celebrities. It is also articulated in media debates concerning the 'facts' of social and environmental issues and events directed at political governance (e.g., the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen), counter-cultural movements (Hawken, 2007), and consumption and lifestyle trends (Inglehart, 2008; Ray and Anderson, 2000). While these public discourses often depict attention to social and environmental issues as urgent, definitions of what is responsible, sustainable and of social benefit remain indeterminate and politically contested by those representing different interests, social positions, and worldviews.

### **Situating responsible leadership in shifting landscapes**

With regards to conceptualising responsible leadership, these five discourses highlight the importance of taking account of the contextual 'turn' in leadership literature (Foldy and Ospina, 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wood, 2005). More specifically, they suggest that theorising needs to extend beyond an examination of individuals and the interactions between participants of responsible business initiatives. In addition, we need to consider that the issues, knowledge and logics that inform responsible business are socially constructed (Berger and Luckman, 1966) and interpreted differently across individuals, organizations, institutional fields and the wider political, economic and socio-cultural context (Gladwin et al., 1995; Marshall, 2007; Matten et al., 2003; Roper and Cheney, 2005). Their construction and institutionalization is pluralistic, contested and dynamic, taking on different directions over time. In this respect, Tams and Marshall (2010) propose the notion of 'shifting landscapes' to depict the multiply changing contexts within which responsible careers are formed and continually (re)developed.

Yet, our understanding of how multiple and diverse contexts influence responsible leadership remains underdeveloped. Existing literature recognises context as an important mediating variable, but has focused on how the context *within* organizations enables and constrains responsible action (e.g., Brown and Trevino, 2006; Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Hamilton and Berken, 2005). Responding to this gap, we examine responsible leadership as situated practice across different fields of responsible business. Here, context is seen not only as discrete and more or less enabling or constraining platforms for individual agency, but as mutually enacted (Griffin, 2007).

Having acknowledged that people are situated within multiple contexts – their organization, institutional field and wider public discourses – and viewing these arenas as 'shifting landscapes', we are interested in how people's interpretations of leadership reference these multiple potential influences. Avoiding contextual determinism, we are particularly attentive to the tension between individual agency and the extent to which people are shaped by the constructions of their respective fields. We therefore examine how people construct responsible leadership in relation to their given situations and what practices they adopt in its enactment. We also investigate how people's career experiences over time and across contexts inform their learning.

### **Methods**

To examine the range of practices by which individuals construct and enact responsible leadership, we used qualitative accounts of people from different settings, exploring how they deploy themselves in their current situation and how this relates to their long-term career development. We used theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989) and interviewed 34 individuals who are taking leadership within the fields of corporate responsibility, social entrepreneurship, sustainability, and social investing. In addition, we drew on tens of informal conversations and on participant observation in field shaping events.

Participants were identified through relevant networks including Net Impact, Business-in-the-Community, The Hub, Pioneers-of-Change, the Global Social Venture Competition, the alumni and student networks of a 'Responsibility Masters' and a Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, and from personal recommendations. The researchers were informed by their longstanding engagement with issues of responsible business. One was Director and tutor for the 'Responsibility Masters' for over eleven years; the other has over ten years of participant observation in networks advocating responsible business.

Interviewees' ages ranged from mid-20s to early 60s, and the sample was evenly balanced in terms of gender (53% female). They represented different organizations, levels and functions. Nineteen worked for mission-based organizations, for example with a focus on social entrepreneurship development; ten for bridge-building organizations providing CSR, sustainability and social investing services to clients; and five in mainstream business. They included eleven top-level executives, twelve senior and middle managers, and eleven independent consultants and (social) entrepreneurs. Their expertise covered social investment, microfinance, social enterprise development, sustainability, strategy and organizational change, although many had integrated capabilities.

Interviews were semi-structured. Participants were initially invited to tell their career stories (Bruner, 1990). Subsequent questions explored their motives, sources of influence, perceptions of the fields within which they were operating, current activities, strategies and learning. Taking leadership in ways they thought strategically appropriate to achieve a positive impact on society was a major preoccupation in their accounts and these aspects were explored further. Thirty-one interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In three cases notes were taken due to lack of consent or technical problems. In addition, analysis was informed by notes taken during and within a few hours of the interview, responses to a demographic questionnaire, biographical abstracts and, where available, articles written by or about interviewees.

Data analysis was conducted in iterative phases following a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005). This identified themes across the sample and also attended to each person individually. Both researchers separately coded transcripts in successive phases of analysis. Periodically, they compared their analyses, identifying key emerging themes, debating concepts, and exploring interdependencies.

This iterative process of analysis converged towards a set of meta-level concepts. In this paper, we explore in depth three dimensions from our study which contribute to mapping the development of responsible leadership.

We adopt a case-study approach to show that responsible leadership is both an orientation of constructing self-in-the-world and a practice of enactment. The four cases were selected from our sample because: (a) individuals demonstrated clear leadership and were articulate about what this involved; (b) the cases illustrate interactions between the responsible leadership practices of institutionalising, field shaping and engaging systemically; and (c) the cases are from diverse contexts, from mainstream to social-mission organizations.

## **Findings**

The three complementary responsible leadership practices we identified are:

- *Institutionalising*: activities are directed at legitimising and embedding responsible practices within organizations and institutional fields as they are currently constituted and in the light of existing patterns of power. People in such situations explain their career choice of working within mainstream businesses in terms of the impacts that can be achieved.
- *Field shaping*: practices are directed at defining an emerging field, such as corporate responsibility reporting or sustainable investing, in ways that change established patterns of operating, promote new standards and build a wider ecology for



responsible business. Field shaping is intentional and strategic, and often involves political activity and coalition building. For many, this involved participating in platforms where representatives from different organizations, often across different sectors, discussed emerging issues in the field.

Both institutionalizing and field shaping reveal the multi-referenced nature of responsible leadership. Individuals are using their organizational positions as platforms for external influencing, working to be systemically influential given current configurations of the business in society landscape, patterns of power and potentialities for change.

- *Engaging systemically*: expresses an ontologically different quality of influencing social change, operating from field awareness. It consciously recognises that “protesting against things” or “thinking in opposites” is futile. It is characterised by a deep appreciation of the interdependence, complexity and indeterminacy of ‘shifting landscapes.’ It combines experimentation with acting from integrity and vision. It operates in enabling and inclusive ways, meeting people where they are.

In the following case analyses, we examine how the responsible leadership practices interweave personal and public considerations in pluralistic spaces. In analysing our findings we bear in mind that all interviewees expressed a desire to have an impact on society as guiding their approach to responsible leadership. They were motivated by a desire to address global challenges including poverty, climate change, and sustainable development. This rationale underpinned their career choices and was the reference against which they chose and evaluated their strategies and behaviours in specific roles. Framing leadership in this way points to the interdependence between individuals’ personal interpretations of agency and the particular situations in which they acted. Our presentations of each case explore insights about the construction and enactment of responsible leadership practices.

#### From institutionalizing to field shaping

Bill’s case illustrates responsible leadership as institutionalising and, more recently, field shaping. Over the past six years, institutionalising has been the prevailing theme as he has advocated a responsible business agenda within his employer, a major global management consulting firm. During this period he set up a not-for-profit business unit that delivers consulting services to international development organizations at significantly discounted rates. Taking this initiative was informed by reflecting about his values and undertaking an international volunteering experience in Macedonia. Based on his earlier employment with the firm, Bill understood that he would not succeed if he were to advocate a pro bono model. The firm was still primarily driven by economic objectives, and so his challenge was to legitimise international development within this context. He connected with a small team of peers and senior-level supporters within the organization and developed the business plan for a separate, self-sustaining unit. His institutionalizing was multi-pronged. So that services can be delivered below the typical rates, projects are staffed by consultants who need to accept a fifty percent pay cut for the six months they join the unit. In parallel, Bill and his colleagues from Human Resources realised that some of the highest performers within the firm were most attracted to these secondments. Staffing is therefore now part of the firm’s leadership development, available only to those who are identified as ‘high performers.’ Bill has also invested in internal and external profile-raising, to ensure that his unit is recognised as part of the firms’ overall CR strategy. He presents at business schools and conferences and disseminates publications in which his unit has been featured. Having been the recipient of several professional awards helps him in this task.

As Bill gained more experience and developed relationships within the international development sectors, the landscape in which he positioned his work evolved. His centre of gravity shifted from legitimising within his employer to the new possibilities of an emerging

field. With this shift, field shaping leadership became increasingly open to him. His view of his role is changing. Initially, he focused on transferring professional consulting skills into the international development sector. Now, he is excited that innovation can emerge from engaging at the interface of different sectors, including large funders, private foundations, NGOs and businesses. As corporate responsibility gains currency, he sees business as no longer merely providers of highly skilled volunteers but also of innovative technology and systems-integrating capabilities that can help address severe issues such as poverty and health. Increasingly, he is interested in what he calls "deep strategic partnering" with large NGOs. Within this wider, emerging landscape, he sees his and his organization's role growing beyond that of a service provider to that of managing cross-sector relationships between NGOs and the FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 companies who are the consulting firm's mainstream business clients.

Despite Bill's approach of situating responsible leadership within his employer's dominant discourse and the new possibilities emerging within the wider responsible business field, his professional commitment is profoundly anchored in his biography and career history. His decision to take leadership occurred during a sabbatical from a 'conventional' career that included an MBA and twelve years in industry and consulting. Despite his achievements, he was seeking to reconnect with the values of public service that his parents had modelled in their careers as teachers on a Scottish island. Yet, rather than 'stepping out' of business, his sabbatical as a volunteer in Macedonia had also provoked frustration about, what he perceived to be, low levels of expertise among many of the consultants he had met there. He felt strongly that the world of international development would benefit greatly from his employer's expertise in high end management consulting. His initiative tries to integrate his values into the world of which he had become a part. Dedicating himself to this project from within his employer, he described this choice as preferring to be "a small fish in a large pond and make a little splash, and then the ripples of that splash go a long, long way, than being a big fish in a small pond."

#### Field-shaping as contested practice

Renee's story illustrates features of field-shaping that were common with cases across the sample. Throughout, we observed strong alignments between individuals' agendas and values and those of their organizations'. Their accounts of responsible leadership were often depicted as 'we' rather than 'I'. In Renee's case we see the risks as well as the strengths of this positioning.

Renee is the Chief Executive of a mission-based social enterprise that seeks to be field-shaping. Initiated by UK retailers and their first tier suppliers, her organization is establishing a unified interface through which companies can validate social audits about suppliers from around the world. They are reporting on labour standards, initiating reports to retailers, and interacting with social auditors in the field and labour activists. This small venture seeks to systemically raise standards across industries. But in the contested space of responsible business, a significant challenge results from uncertainty about emerging standards. Renee was aware that the premises on which she was building her organization and leadership contribution could change significantly. Notably, NGOs are currently challenging her organization about whether their activities might contribute to driving down standards of ethical business, by promoting lowest-common-denominators as baseline measures for action. If such challenges undermine their venture it will not become field-shaping. Unless the organization's initiative does become field-defining, alternative approaches may develop, obviating the organization's work and its members' career investments.

Given the significant challenge resulting from uncertainty about emerging standards, Renee realised that the premises on which she was building her career could change

significantly. She was, however, committed to this venture, for now, and willing to bring her personal energy and experience to bear on work that fulfilled her wish to align values and activities.

### Field shaping through strategic discourse

In Tim's story we find all three responsible leadership practices. Engaging systemically is somewhat tacit in his account, but has informed his decision about his current role and organization, and the ways in which he advocates specific strategies. He talks overtly about seeking a more influential 'place to stand', and access to 'levers to move the world'. Choosing to leave his previous employer, one of the big four accounting firms, just as he completed the part-time Responsibility Masters, was therefore a strategic, values-based choice. He relinquished the potential security and prestige of his earlier post to join a small but renowned sustainable development charity which influences businesses who enrol as 'partners' towards more responsible strategies and practices.

Initially, Tim inherited a project that attempted to institutionalise a way of calculating the extra annual cost of being sustainable, through establishing environmental shadow cost accounting. But corporate partners were not motivated by this attention to their negative impacts on the environment, or by the message "becoming more sustainable will cost you". Progress was slow and often delayed. In retrospect, Tim assesses the environmental shadow cost accounting, and its negative stance, as inherently limited.

Tim then had the opportunity to contribute significantly to the charity's strategic review of its purposes and approach, taking it and him into more overtly field-shaping leadership. He contributed, for example, at the levels of framing and language. He saw opportunities to create an alternative place to stand, promoting sustainable businesses as more successful in terms of shareholder value as well as responsibility. He was influential in reframing the charity's core question to business partners to "what should our business strategy be in the light of sustainability?" Tim saw this reframing trend as already happening in some organizations, but in advocating this phrasing in his organization's promotional work, he also helped it into further realization. He contributed to committing his organization's next moves through this initiative.

Tim is now working with large businesses, ranging from media organizations to automotive manufacturers, advising them on how to embed sustainable development within their strategy. He was proud, for example, about introducing an automotive manufacturer to the idea of shifting focus from selling cars to providing mobility, even though his profound understanding of climate change means he recognises the fundamental contradictions inherent in the automotive industry.

Tim reflected on his leadership approach. In the initial phase of his current role, he thinks he wanted to be too much the expert, knowing everything himself, and that this could have delayed the project's early stages. Acting systemically he experiences "a tension between having a strong point of view and holding that space for others". He says, [I have] "to hold back the intellectual in me who believes I already have the 'right' answer".

Reviewing the leadership approaches Tim has adopted highlights their interactional qualities. Looking back at his career and education, locates him in his accounting and intellectual expertise. Also, having become a parent recently and reviewing his long term career prospects, he wants to ensure his work is relevant to mainstream business. He has a strong sense of urgency about addressing climate change: "action from 2015 might well be too late to put global society on a sustainable track". To act systemically, he is taking advantage of his organization's unique positioning and contract with partners. Because of its charitable status, it is required to challenge as well as support organizations. However difficult it may be to judge impact, Tim's story also shows the limitations of seeking to engage in institutionalising with a systemically inappropriate initiative, as Environmental

Shadow Cost Accounting seemed to be. The charity was able to review its purposes and reframe its approach. Agility and systemic analysis are required in the complex, shifting landscapes in which those seeking to offer responsible leadership are operating.

This case also shows the entanglements of leadership at individual and organizational levels that often apply, and the juxtapositions of attachment and detachment to their own career specifics that people are often navigating. Tim is currently thoroughly identified with his organization, his currently chosen place to stand. In turn, it is heavily influenced by the framing work around strategic sustainability that he and colleagues are doing. And yet, he is aware that should circumstances change, should he judge that the levers to move the world are no longer available to him, the quest for impact may prompt alternative career and leadership choices.

### Engaging systemically

A guiding theme in the way that Karen accounts for herself is her aim of engaging systemically. Now in her later career, she is involved in a range of activities, and states that her quest is always to see “what contribution uniquely I can make”.

She is a Chief Executive of a charity brokering social investments for enterprises in low-income regions of the world. From her portfolio of other activities, Karen talked especially about the work she does on corporate boards and other advisory bodies. She sees herself partly as a cross-pollinator of ideas and connections, operating systemically to test and explore possibilities. Her language of responsible leadership and action is highly relational. Her extensive experience has given her a critical eye for systemic fault lines, and she puzzles about how to work productively through networks and cooperation. She overtly frames situations to go beyond potential polarizations. She does not, for example, criticize companies who have made potentially over-enthusiastic claims about future corporate responsibility directions. Instead she says “let’s think together with them how that can work”.

Based on her experience and on systemic understanding, she has abandoned influencing strategies that are grounded in defined ideological positions and programmatic agendas. Instead, she favours “initiatives” that combine an experimental approach with attention to acting with integrity and vision. She seeks to operate in enabling and inclusive ways, emphasising that it is important to meet people where they are.

One major initiative she is involved with, in concert with others, is seeking to establish a Social Stock Exchange for UK social enterprises. She is concurrently working with a large German foundation to leverage these experiences for social stock exchanges around the globe. Her insight, expertise and contact networks, developed over many years of working internationally, including at the World Bank, help her identify this as a potentially systemic intervention, facilitating transactions which might not otherwise be so readily enabled.

Karen’s approach draws on her lived experiences generated over the course of a long career, rather than the advocacy of particular positions. The network-enabling approach to this venture is a large-scale echo of work she and colleagues undertook when she was still in the World Bank. They established an informal knowledge-exchange operating across the Bank’s compartmentalised structures. In a sense this approach is a process- (rather than initiative-), based form of field-shaping, creating circumstances in which possibilities are enabled to arise. We glimpse Karen’s more personal agendas only in passing. Her attention is focused on the systemic interplay in which she, in collaboration with others, is seeking to enable creative developments. She can trace her current potential contributions through her career history and varied roles, but seeking to enact her “unique contribution” does not appear egoic.

## Discussion

This study identifies three practices through which individuals construct and enact responsible leadership – institutionalising, field shaping and engaging systemically. These contribute to our understanding of responsible leadership, but are not offered as an exclusive mapping. The case study material, informed by our broader data set, shows that they are all systemically situated practices, in which those taking leadership are both informed by concerns for wider societal issues and seeking to contribute to consciousness and action about these issues. They then make career choices, such as which organization to work with, to position themselves in the field. They also operate strategically within their chosen roles with a sense of the broader landscape of issues. We have depicted this landscape as shifting and evolving. The cases illustrate some facets of how this happens, as discourses about responsible business are voiced, changed and contested. Those taking leadership influence these changes, and are also influenced by them. Therefore, their territories of action are not just about exerting interpersonal influence, although this is important, as we see for example in Bill's work to maintain the space of credibility for his unit in his organization. They are also operating within fields of power, in multiple senses, as society debates potential meanings of responsibility and the urgency of environmental and social challenges. The responsible leadership practices we identify range from accommodating to current patterns of legitimacy (institutionalising), to 'stepping beyond' them (field shaping), to letting new potential patterns of order emerge from what currently is (engaging systemically).

Through the cases we see that the three practices are complementary, their use and appropriateness evolving over time through processes of adaptive learning. Reflexivity and learning were major strands in our entire data. These had a strong outward facing dimension, as people paid attention to contexts and how to act within them systemically. And there was a strong inward facing aspect, as people sought to integrate a sense of values, which often had deep biographical roots, into their actions for change. Recognising the evolving learning in these accounts shows that responsible leadership practices are not just strategic actions, but also interweave ongoing experiences. Also, as people accomplish some of their responsible activities, their understanding and their relational possibilities of taking leadership evolve. In developmental terms, we propose that the responsible leadership practices adopted by individuals integrate their awareness of the particular institutional setting in which they are situated, their identification with wider societal debates, their understanding of where and how they can influence, their evaluation of 'success', and their cumulative personal and career experiences (Boiral et al., 2008; McCauley et al., 2006). Taking responsible leadership is, then, a long term career development approach, as people repeatedly place themselves in potentially influential situations, learn and reflect as they act, and develop their senses of agency over time.

One of the particular contributions of this study is that it extends beyond the typical focus on leaders, and draws attention to the relational and systemic work of constructing and enacting leadership on social and environmental issues. This 'leadership work' is not only influenced by the immediate participants in any organizational arrangement and their pluralistic perspectives, but also by wider societal discourses in the public domain. These are inherently dynamic, contested and shifting. We have therefore found it vital to be informed by the five discourses of ethical conduct, corporate responsibility, collaborative governance, institutionalising responsible business and public debate. These help map the multi-referenced world in which our interviewees were constructing and enacting responsible leadership. The juxtapositions and integrations of these discourses are fruitful as lenses to understand responsible leadership in our study. Also they help us contribute to the contextual 'turn' in leadership literature, in particular illuminating aspects of relational leadership as constructing and enacting responsible leadership within social contexts. In this sense,

responsible leadership is both individually agentic and potentially heroic and strongly context-related.

We have initiated a consideration of how the five discourses interrelate, but there is more potential to pursue in future work. For example, our study could contribute to neo-institutional literature. Whilst this depicts social change as unfolding in a context of shifting and pluralistic institutional logics, and to some extent recognises the influence of the institutional or social entrepreneur in these change processes, it lacks insights into both individuals' objective career histories and the subjective interpretations that underpin their impetus to take responsible leadership. By drawing on a long-term career development perspective here, we have begun to fill out these dimensions. Whilst a career perspective could be seen as incorporated into an ethical conduct discourse, our study goes beyond responsibility as 'individual quality or skill', enhancing this approach. It does so partly by recognising individual's committed connections to issues of public debate such as climate change and poverty, their long-term learning approach in the service of wanting to have an impact, and the systemic understandings and qualities of action to which their learning is drawing them.

Despite new insights generated from our qualitative inductive study, we acknowledge several limitations of our research. Firstly, predictions about relationships between institutional settings, individuals' career experiences and responsible leadership practices cannot be made from data of this kind, and so the associations we draw are suggestive, contributing to a wider mapping of theorising about responsible leadership. Secondly, interpretive cross-sectional data from single individuals permits no conclusions about the actual behaviours individuals adopt or the appropriateness and effectiveness of their actions with regards to their respective contexts. There are many other dynamics, including those beyond the influence of interviewees, that determine organizational outcomes. We only have their reports about impacts of their work, although these do sometimes point to public recognition. Not-with-standing these limitations, we offer our work as a contribution to debate.

In terms of theoretical implications, we see our analysis and study as highlighting the importance of avoiding a premature solidification of responsible leadership as a specific construct. We are impressed by the multi-dimensional, multi-referenced, boundary-crossing, evolving nature of how individuals are constructing and enacting responsible leadership. We see them interweaving personal, relational and public aspects in the pluralistic, contested, shifting landscapes of responsibility. Systemic analysis is required, of them and us, to begin to appreciate this dynamism. Given the emerging nature of this field, we propose that theorising about responsible leadership will benefit from openness to diverse disciplines, epistemologies, and critical debate. Speaking from a USA base, Giacalone and Thompson (2006) suggest that ethics in any full sense cannot be taught in traditional MBA courses because it is inconceivable within the organization-centric, economics-privileging paradigm that underpins dominant business school curricula. Responsible leadership is similarly a paradigm-challenging notion. We cannot fully understand it within discourses that place organizations as the primary actors in society. We need instead to enlarge the scope, reach beyond them and integrate societal concerns and discourses, as we find those taking responsible leadership are seeking to do – and as we have sought to do in this paper.

More research is required to consider the outcomes of responsible leadership, which can be judged from multiple perspectives, as illustrated by our five discourses. For example, in relation to our data, we note that initial signs of 'success' might even be detrimental in the longer term, if responsible leaders consolidate their initiatives too speedily, and are therefore too influenced by prevailing business mores. As a consequence, their apparent innovations can be 'more of the same' (Watzlawick et al., 1974). Seeking to have an impact in the

shifting and evolving landscapes of responsible business requires changes that are substantial and radically different from current practices. Institutionalising risks not achieving change of this order, because it is directed at legitimising and embedding responsible practices within current institutional constellations, rather than challenging systemic interdependencies.

Our analysis has implications for the development of responsible leadership. Those working in education should not focus only on individual qualities and capabilities, but should instead be encouraging people to develop awareness of the wider contexts in which responsible leadership is set. This means exploring beyond organizational actors, and paying attention to wider societal debates about social and environmental issues. It also requires encouraging people to place themselves within these debates with an awareness of the values they are adopting, rather than automatically adopting either traditional or 'new' discourses. Education can also offer participants an understanding of the wide range of responsible leadership practices they might adopt, encouraging an integration of career experiences and self-insight into how these might shape leadership approaches. Above all, we suggest, education can emphasise that there is no single definition of responsible leadership practice, but multiple possibilities.

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**Table 1 Discourses about responsible leadership**

<b>Discourse</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Actors</b>	<b>Key arguments</b>
<b>Ethical conduct</b>	How to avoid individuals' unethical conduct in business organizations?	Individuals; Business organizations; Management education	Ethical conduct is grounded in individual characteristics; yet, enabled, constrained and shaped by organizational and professional cultures.
<b>Corporate responsibility</b>	What explains organizations' different approaches to CR?	Individuals; Business organizations	Organizations' CR approaches are shaped by the alignment and learning between individuals, organizations, and environmental feedback.
<b>Collaborative governance</b>	What influences interactions between participants in collaborative governance initiatives?	Multiple individuals and organizational actors from different sectors	Collaboration and outcomes are influenced by: leader competences, governance mechanisms, and relational practices.
<b>Institutionalising responsible business</b>	How do fields of responsible business produce and change participants' common understandings, practices and ongoing relationships with each other?	Institutional actors, including institutional entrepreneurs, organizations, field shaping events, professional bodies, networks	Emerging fields offer scope for innovation, but there are strong pressures for legitimacy building. Struggle arises from actors' competing positions and institutional logics.
<b>Public discourse</b>	What is the influence of the wider socio-cultural sphere on organizational members?	Popular culture, media, citizens, lifestyle and consumer movements	Public discourses can create urgency about social and environmental issues, but definitions of what is responsible, sustainable and of social benefit remain indeterminate and politically contested.